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MEXICAN HUMAN RIGHTS AND SECURITY: POLICY OPTIONS FOR CANADA

March 1998

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Report on the Conference Mexican Human Rights and Security: Policy Options for Canada
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Speakers at this conference included Ms Mariclaire Acosta Urquidi, Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights; Dr. Donald Schulz, Strategic Studies Division, Americas Branch, US Army War College; Professor John Foster, College of Law, University of Saskatchewan; Professor John Saxe-Fernandez, Department of Economics, National Autonomous University of Mexico; and Dr. James Rochlin, Okanagan University College.

Highlights of the presentations and discussions include: growing awareness of the human rights problem in Mexico; escalation of the human rights problem, with abuses committed by the police and paramilitary forces; Chiapas receiving most attention about human rights abuses in Mexico at the expense of other regions; human rights abuses partly in consequence to maldistribution of income; the danger of the militarisation of Mexico due to corruption in the military; the role of NGOs in the struggle to promote human rights throughout the Americas; economic underpinnings of problems associated with security and human rights in Mexico, especially the 'casino capitalism' nature of the Mexican economy; the relative novelty of researching and discussing Mexican security and human rights; the association between the militarisation of Mexico and human rights abuses and the implications for NAFTA.

Recommendations:

- More research is required on the root of Mexican insecurity and human rights abuses, and the threats posed to Canada through NAFTA;
- Canada should provide start-up funding for transnational NGO networkds that are key to Mexican democratisation, and to the struggle for human rights;
- Canada should work through the OAS and the UN to promote human rights in Mexico;
- Canada should give greater consideration in its trade relations with Mexico to the human rights situation in Mexico;
- Canada should encourage the disengagement of the Mexican military from operations against narco-trafficking.

Final Report

for the Conference on

Mexican Human Rights and Security: Policy Options for Canada

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Prepared by Dr. James Rochlin, 20 March 1998, Kelowna, BC

The conference on *Mexican Human Rights and Security: Policy Options for Canada* was a complete success. We gratefully thanked the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development throughout the course of the Conference (especially at the beginning and end), as well as in the advertisements that preceded it.

Attendance and Participation

Based on fairly accurate counts, at the peak we had about 160 people attending on February 13, and at the lowpoint, just over 100. Because people were coming and going, a total of about 250-300 attended the Conference. Many of these were students and faculty members. There were also representatives from relevant NGOs throughout the southern interior of British Columbia, as well as interested members of the public. We took great care to advertise the Conference in a way that would attract the broadest possible audience.

We also had a reception for the Conference Speakers on the evening of February 13. About 120 people attended, including students, faculty, our two local MLAs, and the media. This provided the invitees (especially students) a chance to speak in a casual way with the speakers, and there was much interaction. The students who showed the most interest in the events tended to be those enrolled in majors including International Relations, Latin American Studies, and pre-law students.

Summary of Conference Proceedings (Main Points)

1) Ms Mariclaire Acosta Urquidi, Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights.

A) There is growing national and international recognition of the human rights problem in Mexico.

B) While human rights abuses in Mexico have existed for decades, there have been two important developments during the NAFTA Years: 1) Human rights abuses have escalated throughout the country, but especially in Southern Mexico, since the appearance of the Zapatistas and the EPR (Popular Revolutionary Army); 2) NGOs interested in human rights have proliferated considerably during these years. Hence, not only have human rights abuses escalated, they have been more widely reported by the various agencies that are now operating in this realm.

C) Although the human rights issue has generally attracted more attention, within Mexico and internationally, the human rights situation in Mexico has been getting steadily worse. Most human rights abuses are committed by the State (police and military), and increasingly, by paramilitary forces (Ms. Acosta's agency

believes these forces comprise and are directed by the Mexican police and military).

D) The increasing militarization of Mexico, especially in the South, is contributing to human rights abuses and escalating political problems there. Hence, rather than containing conflict, it is contributing to it.

E) The Chiapas situation, rather than winding down, is quickly transforming into a powderkeg. The massacre at Acteal in December 1997 brought to light the escalating problem of paramilitary violence, as well as their role in fueling what will probably be an even more intense cycle of mayhem in the near future.

F) The recent trend of expulsion of foreigners - especially those associated with NGOs in Chiapas - has heightened political tension, and has reduced the element of surveillance which provides for the protection of human rights.

G) While many NGOs have formed in the area of human rights in Mexico, they have tended to focus on Chiapas, while other regions of Mexico remain neglected.

H) The Organization of American States represents an important venue for Human Rights vigilance in Mexico, and Ms. Acosta's

agency has been successful in lobbying members of the OAS in ways that raise Mexico's human rights profile.

I) Ms Acosta is grateful for funding and other assistance provided to her agency by Canadian NGOs. Since she, and other NGO leaders, have received death threats due to the nature of their work, trips to Canada and elsewhere provide her with a profile that may reduce the credibility of such threats.

2) **Professor Donald Schulz, Strategic Studies Division, Americas Branch, US Army War College, Pennsylvania, USA.**

A) Professor Schulz indicated that Mexico is becoming steadily less stable, although some figures are used to mask that reality. GDP figures which indicate strong macro-growth in the country do not convey a more worrying reality: the division of wealth in the country is worsening, and real incomes are declining.

B) There are fundamental problems in the Mexican economy, which centre around maldistribution of income, which represent the basis for security problems and human rights abuses.

C) The militarization of Mexico represents a dangerous step,

since it is unlikely to restore order in the context of economic problems, and in southern Mexico, ethnic tension.

D) By far the most serious strategic issue in Mexico is the involvement of the Mexican military, at the request of the US government, in the fight against narcotrafficking.

E) The central problems associated with this revolve around corruption. Narcotraffickers can always pay the military more than they legitimately earn. In effect, the narcotraffickers buy off the Mexican military - from top to bottom - so that they cannot be relied upon to act in the expressed interests of the Mexican Government, or as reliable cohorts of the US.

F) Thus, the involvement of the Mexican military in the struggle against narcotrafficking has exacerbated the security crisis in Mexico by undermining the accountability of the Mexican army. This also weakens any trend toward democracy in the country, which also exacerbates the Mexican crisis.

G) Narcotrafficking - worth perhaps $30 billion (US) annually to Mexico in profits alone - is a central contributing factor the human rights abuses in Mexico, since it essentially rests on the use of force outside the purview of legitimate legal structures.

3) **Professor John Foster, College of Law, University of Saskatchewan**

A) Professor Foster provided an excellent discussion of the role of NGOs in the struggle to promote human rights throughout the Americas.

B) NGOs, as one component of the broader rubric of social movements, represent an increasingly important political force as traditional political parties may be growing weaker.

C) NGOs, alone and in cooperation with others, have various sites of focus: national governments, international organizations, and grass-roots problem areas.

D) There has been steadily more cooperation between NGOs from the NAFTA countries on the issue of human rights.

E) Transnational NGO networks are at a nascent phase, but show promise.

F) Transnational NGO networks can offset what some see as the potentially negative effects of NAFTA: a feeling of loss of political control over local events. These networks may have the capacity to balance the power, in effect, of transnational capital.

G) National governments, which sometimes may be reluctant to respond to grass roots movements, are much more likely to do so when transnational networks amplify the specific issue.

4) **Professor John Saxe-Fernandez**, Dept. Of Economics, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City.

A) Professor Saxe-Fernandez concentrated on the economic underpinnings of problems associated with security and human rights in Mexico.

B) He noted that while aggregate GDP growth in the country has increased over the last 12 months, this affects only about 10% of the country.

C) He presented figures which suggest that, overall, income

distribution has been growing more inequitable every year since 1983 (after the Debt Crisis and the imposition of neoliberalism). He also showed that real wages have fallen 70% over that time-period.

D) He noted that most foreign direct investment in Mexico remains speculative capital, or hot money, rather than direct foreign investment (for industrial plants, eg). Overall two-thirds of all foreign investment in Mexico during 1994 was speculative capital. This was the backdrop for the Peso Crisis of 1994-1995, which witnessed the sudden flight of speculative capital.

E) Professor Saxe-Fernandez emphasized the future risks for security and stability posed by this sort of `casino capitalism.'

F) A central thrust of his argument was that the security crisis in Mexico, as well as the associated human rights crises, are rooted in economic problems: growing inequity; falling real wages; escalating unemployment (especially among the youth in Mexico's pyramidal population structure); the link between poverty and race (the poor Indigenous population); cutbacks in social services, etc.

F) While neoliberal in Mexico has typically been associated with a `smaller state', this has only been so with respect to social welfare. The Mexican state is *actually growing* in the repressive

sector (the military and police). A variety of statistics were used to demonstrate this empirically.

G) By way of conclusion, Professor Saxe-Fernandez suggested that there were three essential sites of integration associated with NAFTA: economic, governmental, and the popular sector led by NGOs. It is the third site that merits more attention, in his estimation. Other panels members emphasizes that they concur.

5) **Professor Harry Cleaver**, Department of Economics, University of Texas at Austin.

A) Professor Cleaver provided an historical background of social struggle and political awareness in the United States, especially among students, as it relates to the current Mexican crisis.

B) He traced the evolution of the internet site which he created - Chiapas95, which is arguably among the most important internet sites ever created. He indicated that friends in Europe asked him to post some information for them regarding Mexican politics, since there was so little news in the media regarding that topic. What started as a personal site to provide information to his colleagues, then, quickly bloomed as the premier site for news on Chiapas and Mexican security.

C) He indicated, then, that the effects and success of his site

were not expected.

D) Sites such as his, he indicated, have served as surveillance devices which have radically altered security. The Zapatistas, he argued, might have been exterminated militarily had it not been for communication devices such as the Internet, which have shined the floodlights of world attention on Chiapas.

E) The internet's effects of essentially shrinking time and space have created strategic consequences which have net yet been fully appreciated or understood.

F) NGOs, especially those associated with the struggle for human rights, have been the chief beneficiaries of the Internet, while the traditional security structures have become its central victims.

G) The provision of more computers, as well as cyber-training, will assist Mexico in political development, by increasing access to information and through the creation of better transparency through surveillance.

6) **Dr. James Rochlin**, Dept of Political Science, Okanagan University College.

A) Dr Rochlin provided a brief summary of his book, *Redefining Mexican Security*, and also provided a summary-conclusion of the Conference.

B) The issues of Mexican Security and of human rights are relatively new topics of research and discussion, since they were not mentioned until after NAFTA took effect.

C) When one refers to the Mexican `crisis', this is in relation to a long period of Mexican stability that stretched from the Revolution until 1982. It is empirically observable that Mexican security problems - and associated problems of human rights - commenced with the inequities surrounding neoliberalism beginning in 1983.

D) Increased militarization of Mexico is associated with increased human rights abuses. Rather than the superficial military approach, the roots of the crisis must be addressed. Otherwise, it is possible that parts of the country (especially the South) could slip into a civil war. This would essentially torpedo NAFTA.

E) Transnational NGO networks represent a key to Mexican democratization and to the defense of human rights. As one component of social movements, these have the ability to create a new democratic force, and can serve some of the functions previously performed by political parties during an earlier period of national production and national sovereignty.

F) While considerable academic and NGO work focusses on Chiapas, the general issue of Mexican security under NAFTA requires much further research and understanding.

G) The United States is largely directing the military struggle in Mexico. Mexico has taken a back seat, with Canada totally out of the picture. Canada must take a stronger position - both with respect to understanding and researching the issue, as well as lobbying for less repressive and inequitable structures which threaten the success of NAFTA.

Mexican Human Rights and Canadian Policy Options

The following are conclusions which emerged from Conference Speakers, and from the audience.

1) More research needs to be conducted regarding the root of Mexican insecurity and human rights abuses, and the threats that are posed to Canadian interests within NAFTA. The Canadian Government should sponsor more Canadian research on these issues, and should re-instate research grants through programs such as the Cooperative Security Competition Program.

For Canada to have a truly credible foreign policy, Canada must also have sufficient Canadian research which informs such policy.

2) Transnational NGO networks are key to Mexican democratization, and to the struggle against human rights. The Canadian Government should provide seed money for the organization of such networks (through funding preliminary conferences and meetings, and so forth).

3) The Canadian Government should work through the Organization of American States and the United Nations to promote human rights in Mexico.

4) Even if Canada is unwilling to link trade with human rights, it should at least pay attention to the Mexican security crisis and to the growing human rights problem. The trade mission which recently visited Mexico ignored the Acteal massacre and other dimensions of Mexican human rights and security. This makes Canada look weak, visionless, and disinterested in the Mexican crisis.

5) More computers and cyber-training for Mexican NGOs would assist in bolstering Mexican democratic development, and would also promote human rights. Greater access to information, and greater national and international surveillance, are key here This could also be used to build tighter NGO networks.

6) Canada should attempt to convince the US and Mexico to extract the Mexican military from participation in the struggle against narcotrafficking, since this contributes to corruption and human rights abuses.

7) Overall, Canada seems focussed only upon economic matters in Mexico. Canada's economic interests in the country depend on Mexican stability, which was falsely assumed as a `given' during NAFTA negotiations.

The security crisis in Mexico is worsening, despite scant coverage in the mainstream media. Sound-bites which do appear in the media emphasize the growth of aggregate GDP, while failing

the mention that wealth is being distributed more inequitably than ever, and that real wages have plummeted over the last 15 years.

Mexico is being militarized to an unprecedented extent, and the security crisis is worsening. There is a perception that Canada is ignoring the crisis, leaving the US to direct military affairs in Mexico under NAFTA.